DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 069 007 CS 500 044

AUTHOR Frisch, Jack E.
TITLE Toward a Humanistic Theatre.
PUB DATE Apr 72
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Central States Speech Assn. Conference (Chicago, April 7-8, 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Acting; *Creative Dramatics; Empathy; *Humanism; *Intercommunication; Interpersonal Relationship; Professional Training; Role Playing; Self Actualization; *Theater Arts

ABSTRACT

The nineteenth-century scientism of Stanislavsky has produced actors who are mechanical and unspontaneous. An alternative to this traditional approach is based on the application of new psychological insights to the production of drama. This approach not only allows the actors to explore their "being," but also allows the audience to feel a communicative contact with the actor as a real person. To illustrate the new production techniques, a theatre event, called "Mandala," is described. "Mandala," was created by a university class which prepared the script, directed, and performed employing the premise that "each person was himself an actuality" rather than an actor preparing for a role. (Author/RN)

ED 069007

Jack E. Frisch
Associate Professor
Communication-Action
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
College of Creative Communication
Green Bay, Wisconsin 54302

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Toward a Humanistic Theatre

As I was finishing this paper two especially appropriate articles appeared in a single issue of the Educational Theatre Journal (Vol. XXIII, No. 2, May, 1971). The first, by Professor Gil Lazier,* is about an experiment with a contemporary "living newspaper" presentation focused upon the Kent State incident and called No Excuse. Several things are striking about the work, but three I want to mention in particular: the nature of the group creation and presentation, the concern for being involved with the audience, and the combination of trained and untrained actors, theatre and non-theatre students.

The satisfying nature of a coming together by disparate people into an effectively creative group was noted several times by Lazier. He closed the article with this comment: "Of one thing I am quite certain: the joys and rewards of group creativity were so great that I know I must seek to replicate them under other circumstances."[1]

Important attempts were made to keep from separating performer and audience by a realness in the work and by a particular use of environments. As Lazier said, "I was later to realize that our kind of theatre worked best off the stage, that the conventional and therefore safe relationships of actor and audience diminished the effectiveness of No Excuse."[2]

---

*"Living Newspaper 1970: Obituary for a Gentle Agit-Prop Play" (pp. 135-151).

CS 500 044

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jack E. Frisch
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER.

And finally, a most important statement about the people involved is made. The group (twelve) included six working on degrees in theatre, and six "scattered all over the school" (with five who had never been on stage before). Lazier's paragraph on this aspect of the work deserves full citation:

> The lack of theatre experience in the group proved to be of tremendous aesthetic benefit in the long run. In fact, I found myself constantly urging the few trained performers to stop acting, to talk to the spectators directly, not to portray a role. I cannot define this difference in tangible behavior, but it seemed that "acting" this piece was undesirable, that the communication had to be direct, unfiltered through the conventional symbols of the theatre. Interestingly enough, the two extensively "trained" actresses in our company... had the most difficulty with this dimension. [One,] for example, did a fine oral presentation of her material, getting nuance from the lines, interpreting and projecting emotion carefully and honestly--but she was much too polished, almost too good at it. Her heightened sense of the theatrical seemed unnecessarily imposed whereas in other dramatic contexts it would have been quite effective. We had to achieve a nontheatrical sincerity that our novices brought with them.[3]

The second article cited is that by George Gunkle.* He designates a taxonomy for study of the "dominant model of the theatre experience." In doing so, he points out that alteration of any one of the assumptions underlying this model "produces the appearance of a markedly different form of theatre--and on the present scene, each of them [i.e. the assumptions] is under attack."[4]

Most noteworthy for my purposes are Professor Gunkle's brief comments about such possible alterations. They include questions about:

---

*"Empirical Research in Theatre: State of the Art, 1970" (pp. 171-77).

> art as a specialization requiring lengthy apprenticeship, and the challenge of artistic expression by the totally untrained;
>
> "the performer-audience dichotomy," and movement toward "obliteration of the distinctions in audience and performer roles;"
>
> the "live" nature of theatre, its ephemerality, the "stability of behavior across performances, and the like;"
>
> and the fact that performances in theatre have a "near-absence of spontaniety" and are essentially "canned."

Such alternative assumptions are part of Professor Lazier's experiment and also of one with which I have recently worked (Mandala).

This is not to propose a new method of training actors. My teaching/directing experiences have led me, as with Professors Gunkle and Lazier, to question some commonly-held tenets about theatre and acting. These experiences and subsequent thoughts may also offer possible future directions--may, perhaps, indicate the why of Professor Lazier's concern about the "acting" in No Excuse.

Psychological insights have gone beyond the nineteenth-century scientism of Stanislavsky which dominates our theatre. The important thing now is for both psychology and theatre to investigate the ramifications. The fact that any form of theatre is uniquely involved with individual, group, and societal human behavior certainly suggests a greater mutual concern. I hope to outline some bases for that suggestion.

Mandala was a theatre event created by twenty of us in a university class. We came together and let some things happen. We wanted to see if these happenings, coming from "where we were at," could culminate in

a "play" for public presentation. On my part, this was an extended attempt at bringing together concerns with personhood in theatre and in humanistic psychology. Such a coalescing seems to me significant for theatre, its training, and community (in the fullest sense of that already abused word).

The creation of Mandala required a non-threatening, non-judgmental environment of the sort Carl Rogers finds essential to the learning process. Minimizing role assumptions was important in the major relationships of traditional teacher-student, expert-novice, and even the usual conception of director-actor. This in turn led to the dropping of less "systematized" roles. An atmosphere of "Realness, Prizing, Acceptance, Trust, and Empathic Understanding"[5] was sought.

In such an atmosphere we could "let ourselves go" and trust to what happened. "Script writing" and "directing" were participated in by everyone at one time or another. Stage roles to be acted were non-existent. Each person was himself in actuality. What happened did so from within each member of the group at the moment.

One segment, for example, involved an "exclusion circle." All members of the group but one formed a closed, facing-out circle; the excluded person tried to get into the circle. Certain "rules" regarding the action gave a kind of role to the "outsider" and to members of the circle. Both had to keep trying--the one to get in, the others to keep him out; and ultimately the excluded person, if he had not already accomplished it in other ways, was to be allowed in.

The game-like nature of this is obvious. But, as with any game, the events within the strictures were real. The "outsider" (whoever

it happened to be) knew he would be excluded, taunted,* and eventually admitted. He did not know, however, exactly when or how any of this might occur. A teasing separation in the joined bodies, with or without a verbal invitation, might remain open or suddenly close him out; a physical attempt might break through; an entreaty or trick might suddenly work. The situation and its frustrations were real.

The "meaning" of such segments was contained in the associational facets of a moment itself and in the total context of juxtaposition and sequence. A major focus of the entire work was the alternation of childlike openness and freedom with "closed-system" mechanical, conformist, and time-haunted activities. This evolved from "child's play" kinds of exercises and mirroring as well as other appropriation-of-action exercises.

In the former instance, the group members were, of course, playing the roles of children. It was important, however, to not play at being children, but rather to allow oneself to be childlike. The role was again real. Each person was himself, but that facet of himself which was still a child.

Similarly, as one segment was transformed into something else, the performer could allow that transformation to come out of himself. A "playground" segment, for example, contained the closest thing to a theatrical role portrayal in the entire work. While the group is dispersed about the playing space involved in various child activities

---

*Although not a stated rule, verbal and physical teasing (personally directed) became a regular occurance. No one had said it must happen, but it became a sort of consensus, happened most of the time, and added meaningful dimensions to the work.

(playing jacks, skipping rope, having a game of tag, and the like), one of the people gradually "becomes older" and separated from the children. He no longer plays the games; he becomes concerned for what should and shouldn't be done; and finally he is so upset by the cacophony that he suddenly yells "Shut Up!" and the activity abruptly ceases. This process had to occur within the person doing the role. Whatever there was beyond childhood in him and whatever propensities he had toward an "uptight" aging were allowed to happen. From start to finish of creation/preparation through performance, Mandala involved persons in their own becoming.

This process relied heavily upon what Abraham Maslow has called "primary creativity:"

> . . . that which comes easily and without effort as a spontaneous expression of an integrated person, or of a transient unifying within the person. It can come only if a person's depths are available to him, only if he is not afraid of his primary thought processes.[6]

The real person-to-person relationships possible in an accepting, non-threatening situation allowed one to freely "expose" himself to a very great extent. The "suppressed (rather than repressed)" primary processes were freed for "revery, poetry, play."[7]

I find these concepts equally valuable in working with "conventional" drama and with different kinds of production situations. It has never been a problem, for example, to have a combination of students, community people, and faculty colleagues in a production. With the minimal role categorization, these "differences" are virtually non-existent. Persons come together to investigate a particular play.

Within this supportive context, exercises, interpretative study, stage blocking, and character work are done with a sense of free exploration. For a long while, there is a searching about for the character--individually and in relationship to others. Few or no restraints are put upon thoughts, actions, or reactions as they occur. Freely-received impressions and freely-enacted expressions occur within a total, interrelated context of situation/other/self. The actor as a person becomes "available" in order to dis-cover both himself and the dramatic character. Something truly happens, now.

Allowing things to happen in this way does not always come easily in such a "rehearsal" situation. Saying that it should does not help; it must gradually be perceived by the group as true (and, in varying degrees, anew each time). When we feel impatient, frustrated at a lack of insight into character, a stumblingness, a "memory" problem, the urge is great to "set things straight now" and "make sure it's right." Acknowledging an impatience or frustration and working it through without arbitrarily forcing a "solution" sometimes comes hard. Inevitably, the "problems" disappear, selections are easily arrived at, and the result is highly affective as well as bringing new dimensions to the work. It is also a satisfyingly human way to work.

Early teaching and directing which led me in this direction involved plays of the "absurdist" theatre. It was necessary to make contact with "history-less" characters. Usually background motivational clues were often non-existent or deliberately contradictory. Alienation, isolation, aloneness, and fear were exhibited, not talked about. Reasons for them were not given. Yet the people and situations of Pinter,

Ionesco, and Beckett inhabit our being. Proliferating things, a lonely road, "corpsed" emptiness, or the unnamable "out there," go deep; the creatures who cannot sit down, stand up, move, or speak are found within us. They emerge as discoveries which are rich, varied, individual, and always surprising.

At this point one gains some very special insights from "amateur" acting in relation to "professional" acting. More specifically, of course, the issue lies in the training of the actor.

Among the charges usually brought against amateur acting are that it is accidental, imprecise, imperfect, and inconsistent. This is the basis for Stanislavsky's endeavors to establish what he called the "science of theatre;" the haphazard nature of excellent but unrepeatable performances even by the professional called for a more systematic means of developing the actor's techniques.

There is no doubt that Stanislavsky's consequent discoveries have been valuable. Certainly they have made important contributions to effective theatre presentation. They linked acting with psychology, itself a major achievement (particularly essential, of course, to the development of realistic theatre). And they have added to an understanding of ourselves.

As with discoveries of Freud and Pavlov, Stanislavsky found tools in the infinitesimal "dissecting" of one's self (and the dramatic character) and in a wilful control of stimulus-response conditioning. The actor works to "perfect his instrument" (himself) in the most efficiently usable way. Consequently, he can trigger the necessary appropriate emotions to portray any character.

These very attributes, however, raise other problems. To approach the actor's task with a concept of self as an instrument is a destructive objectification. One becomes a thing. No doubt it can be done, and done very effectively. But an overlooked question remains: how objectified can a person become and remain a person? An often-cited comparison is the musician who learns and practices his instrument long and thoroughly. But the actor is a person and not the same as a violin.

This seems to me a misuse of what Theodore Roszak has called the "objective consciousness." Although useful for "the scientific method" and such a viewing of the world, it remains only a method of viewing. It is

> . . . emphatically not some manner of definitive, transcultural development whose cogency derives from the fact that it is uniquely in touch with the truth. Rather, like mythology, it is an arbitrary construct.[8]

When such a myth is used regarding persons, it leaves gaping holes in the understanding of humaness. And in the humaness of acting, in our particular instance.

I am not speaking here of skill work with voice and body movement. Drill with these certainly seems possible, although even here we may be on shaky ground. Work in bio-energetics has begun to establish interrelationships in this realm. I would guess the more fully we come to understand bodily function as non-mechanistic, the less we will be able to speak of self as instrument in even that way. The crucial matter is still the organism and its organismic functioning in totality.

The particularization of skill work on the emotions, on the other hand, seems to me incontrovertibly mechanistic in an area where

mechanics have no place. As Michael Polanyi has said, "behaviourism, which suggests that these particulars should be studies in themselves, is totally impracticable."[9] Not only impracticable, however. For it is this which makes possible the appropriately manipulable creation of a product of the self. It is a product resulting from misapplication of what Maslow calls "secondary creativity." Following primary creativity, the hard question must be asked in order to achieve the goals of secondary creativity--i.e. "the consolidation and development of other people's ideas" toward creation of a product. As he points out, peak experiences (primary creativity) "happen to a person," while a product (secondary creativity) is made by the person.[10]

It is one thing, however, to speak of a product made by a person, and another to equate the person and the product. Actor's training has been predominantly concerned with making more definitive, precise, and consistent the actor's craft--i.e. the ability to play on himself, his instrument. The actor learns to act like himself. He accomplishes, in the term of Fritz Perls, a "self-image-actualization." As one psychiatrist writing on the actor has put it,

> Beyond adolescence a labile and tenuous character structure is a kind of sickness. . . To the actor, however, this sickness is his stock-in-trade. He is free of it only onstage when he is performing and ultimately when he achieves an identity as a professional actor, which is more than a role, but a way of life, something he has become.[11]

Such an identification is the sort of objectified atrophy which Perls calls "character." He speaks of it as an armor and warns of some possible consequences:

> Once you have a character, you have developed a rigid system. Your behavior becomes petrified, predictable, and you lose your ability to cope

stimulus has been trained into triggering it. When triggered, an emotion is indeed projected, but it is from out of the past and not of the present.

Gordon Allport has said, "past stages of life do not fully explain the motivational 'go' of the present."[13] Since the only life a dramatic character can possibly have, occurs with his present enactment, I have found this statement equally appropriate to any dramatic character and to the actor. Treasure-digging one's own psyche and that of the character leads to a cause-effect, stimulus-response behaviorism (i.e. something based on the past rather than concerned with a present life) which becomes predictably mechanical.

Various "extra-theatrical" ramifications of these differences are perhaps even more important. Certainly they need further study. First, the realness of the unobjectified person is vital to the performer's health (and that fact informs the result onstage). The process of creation has not been an onion-peeling in order to be manipulatively rebuilt to some image; rather, it has been a supportive, self-actualizing growth. This difference calls for all the attention we can muster toward the "acting profession." When it can be said as virtually a truism that the actor has a sickness which is his stock-in-trade, something is surely amiss.

Second, when the profession of which this is true purports to concern itself with our very existence (as I believe theatre does), the means do indeed subvert the ends. Here, too, the medium is the message; and the message may not be what the profession thinks it is.

> freely with the world with all your resources. You are predetermined just to cope with events in one way, namely, as your character prescribes it to be.. ..If I identify with, let's say, my profession, then this identification may become so strong that if my profession is then taken away, I feel I don't exist anymore, so I might just as well commit suicide.[12]

It is this neglect of the fact that the product being dealt with is a person which leaves the very basis of much of the Stanislavsky System outdated. Theatre is seen actually to contradict its uniqueness among art forms--the literal humaness of living actors in actual interaction among themselves and their audiences.

This admittedly is a troublesome uniqueness: people can go only so far--ever--toward immutable perfection, precision, and consistency. Yet, art often finds its greatest strengths through the struggle with its peculiar difficulties. It is the "untrained amateur" who retains an aliveness--not in spite of inconsistency, imprecision, or lack of craft, but because of it. He is surprising.

I am often struck by the realness, the actuality, of the persons onstage, while at the same time perceiving a manifestation of the dramatic character. I am affected by them in a way I seldom am by the "professional" actor's illusion of reality. There is a difference between the actual involvement of self with dramatic character in the one instance, and an objectification of the self and dramatic character in the other. Discovering what is happening in process and becoming adept at projecting emotions are very different matters for the person/actor. Acting remains a doing. It is. As soon as it relies too heavily upon the past--past hurts, past angers, past motivations--it seems to me no longer doing, but having done. An emotion has been selected and a

Third, an audience member is participating--sharing--in a fundamentally more humanistic experience when, beyond a level of empathic identification with a dramatic character, there is a felt contact with a real person. The reciprocal nature of communication is then actually taking place.

Finally, such contact is vital to the entire psycho-socio nature of theatre. Without it, an audience no longer assists a performance but merely attends it.* It is much easier with the latter to become preoccupied elsewhere. In this respect, most "reasons" for lack of support for theatre in the United States are symptoms rather than causes. The causes may more appropriately be found in the separation of community and actor inherent in the latter's objectification of self. An Us and Them dichotomy accrues to the entire process and debilitates the latter's involvement with the former. Neither is seen as really of concern to the other. Rather than an integrated organism, we find alienated parts at odds with each other. And just as humanistic psychology is of assistance in the integrating of persons, it may be of assistance in integrating our most person-al art form.

---

*The French and English terms for the "same" thing may be crucial in their differences.

NOTES

1. Lazier, Gil, "Living Newspaper 1970: Obituary for a Gentle Agit-Prop Play" (Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, May, 1971), p. 151.

2. 142.

3. 138.

4. Gunkle, George, "Empirical Research in Theatre: State of the Art, 1970" (Educational Theatre Journal, Vol. XXIII, No. 2, May, 1971), p. 174. The subsequent brief, "phrasing" citations are from the list of "Features" making up the body of Gunkle's article.

5. Rogers, Carl, in Freedom to Learn (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1969), but particularly pp. 106-115.

6. Maslow, Abraham, Toward a Psychology of Being (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1968), pp. 143-44.

7. 142.

8. Roszak, Theodore, The Making of a Counter-Culture (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969), p. 215.

9. Polanyi, Michael, The Study of Man (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1959), p. 65.

10. Maslow, 143.

11. Kaplan, Donald, "Character and Theatre: Psychoanalytic Notes on Modern Realism" (Tulane Drama Review, Vol. 10, No. 4, T32, Summer, 1966), p. 107.

12. Perls, Fritz, Gestalt Therapy Verbatim (Lafayette, California: Real People Press, 1969), pp. 7-8.

13. Allport, Gordon, "Psychological Models for Guidance" in Science and Literature (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1970), Edited by Edward M. Jennings, P. 233.